Modern Tendencies in the Education of the Blind

By Edward E. Allen, Sc.D.

Published by
American Foundation for the Blind, Inc.
125 East 46th Street, New York, N. Y.
1934

HV1626
A

M.C. MIGEL LIBRARY
AMERICAN PRINTING
HOUSE FOR THE BLIND

C. 1

Modern Tendencies in the Education of the Blind

By Edward E. Allen, Sc.D.

A Paper Read at the Exercises Held in Celebration of the Fortieth Anniversary of the Establishment of Work for the Blind in the State of Connecticut November 24, 1933

Published by
American Foundation for the Blind, Inc.
125 East 46th Street, New York, N. Y.
1934

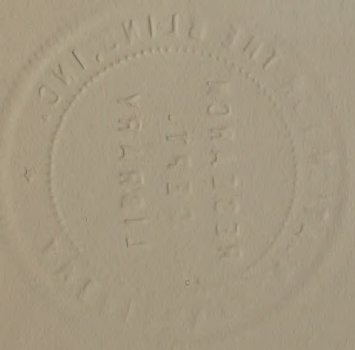
AMERICAN FOUNDATION FOR THE BLIND LIBRARY

Copyright, 1934, by the
American Foundation for the Blind, Inc.

HV1626
A
Copy I

43134-NIGEL

PRINTED IN U. S. A.



FOREWORD

A changing type of pupil personnel in our schools and classes for the blind, coupled with a constant advance in methods of education in general, necessitates a frequent revaluation of our program of education for blind students.

The celebration of the Fortieth Anniversary of the establishment of work for the blind in the State of Connecticut held in Hartford November 24, 1933, furnished a fitting opportunity for a glimpse at past, present and future trends in the education of the blind child.

In training, experience, and breadth of vision, Dr. Edward E. Allen, Director Emeritus, Perkins Institution and Massachusetts School for the Blind, is admirably fitted to analyze these trends in the education of the blind. In order to make Dr. Allen's notable address available to those interested in work for the blind, the American Foundation for the Blind has arranged to have it published in pamphlet form.

ROBERT B. IRWIN, *Executive Director,*
American Foundation for the Blind.

Modern Tendencies in the Education of the Blind

Introduction

For sixty years prior to 1893, when you started state-wide care of your blind, you had been sending those of school age, and for a score of years more, your high school pupils to the Massachusetts School and supposing that your problem was taken care of. But the stumbling upon a waif of a blind baby here, then brought into being The Heart Sunshine Society whose missionary zeal found numerous other blind babies and also numerous blind adults needing immediate care and relief. A demonstration before your legislature naturally made the moving appeal intended, and a special board of education was established which lost no time in setting up machinery for all your blind people, more complete than existed elsewhere in America. You opened your Nursery for Blind Babies, the first in the land, presently added your own kindergarten and school, your trade training institution and home, and later your home teaching and your needy blind relief services.

A writer, well informed in this field of work, wrote and published the following in *The Mentor,* in 1894: "It is of the utmost importance that this generous movement [in Connecticut] be wisely guided, to escape the dangers in its path, and to secure the highest good for the blind of the State." Possibly it was through heeding this caution that you made the office of executive secretary of the new board not a desk, one merely for coordinating and harmonizing the several departments, but also a field one for general educational propaganda and for finding the children and adults to be taught and trained and for placing or otherwise employing them afterwards. May I be permitted to say that doubtless because of this liaison office, uncommonly

comprehensive as it is, and possibly also because most of your instructional heads have been intimate with and in blindness itself, you have avoided, for the most part, the dangers and pitfalls all too common in philanthropic enterprizes so emotionally governed as this. Indeed, I have heard it stated by a fellow worker who had visited Hartford often that Connecticut had done uncommonly well.

Changing Conditions

The forty years you are celebrating seems but a short time. However, during this period, much has happened to demand modification of the original plan. Social service, having everywhere become a profession, has been taken over as a state and municipal function. The age-long belief that most of the woes of the world are inevitable is moribund. Among other noticeable things the pupilage of our schools for the blind is happily not increasing with the population. This is due partly to the gradual absorption of multitudes of low-vision children into sight saving classes in the public schools; namely, from two classes in 1913 to 430 in 1933; and is due partly to preventive medicine. Babies' sore eyes which, until recently, was the chief feeder of our particular schools, is no longer so. We are now encouraged to believe that another important feeder of them, syphilis, will next come under control. The demand for routine testing of the blood of all expectant mothers is growing and the positive Wassermanns treated will lower this cause of infantile blindness as effectively as dropping silver nitrate into the eyes of the new-born has already lowered the incidence of ophthalmia neonatorum. With the International Congress of Ophthalmologists favoring the matter last year, and six sessions of the American Medical Association passing favorable resolutions this year, the American Hygiene Association and our National Society for the Prevention of Blindness "adopted as part of their respective programs the promotion of care for expectant syphilitic mothers to conserve sight, and are working out a plan of action."

But our schools for the blind are destined not only to dwindle in size and perhaps in number but also to change in the character of their pupils. Since much of the unpreventable blindness in children is of a deep-seated, obscure nature that is accompanied by certain physical and mental abnormalities, it appears inevitable that the proportion of these pupils who are unpromising will increase. Teachers of the blind are already alarmed. When in 1910 I planned the new Perkins Institution I was foreseeing enough not to enlarge its capacity but by no means optimistic enough to perceive how soon its pupil element would deteriorate. Were I to rebuild it now I should have two widely separated school plants, the more elaborate, refined, expensive, and dynamic one at Watertown for promising pupils and a simpler one elsewhere for the unpromising.

Selective Education for Diverse Groups

Since similarly diverse classes among our seeing children attending public day schools are no longer educated together but wherever possible even housed separately, how much more vital is it to educate the same two distinct groups of blind children who attend residential institutions, apart, as otherwise they would be kept years intimately together. Blindness may weaken most children handicapped by it but it certainly strengthens a minority of them. Did it not do so you would scarcely be able to claim, as you can and do, that a fair proportion of your trainees had made good in life. Now if, as the White House Conference on Child Health and Protection demands, every child shall be trained in the environment that will develop the best that is in him, so we must be lavish in the educational incentives, both material and personal, with which we surround our promising blind, while we are just as considerate in our care of the unpromising, who are the real social deviates. Moreover, these two opposite classes of youth are far happier apart. Witness any well run community of the simple; there the children, in the company of their equals, do not realize their shortcomings

and are radiantly happy. If, therefore, your Board of Education of the Blind is considering changes in housing, I beg of you to weigh well the potentialities and excellences of selective education. England, which has long had two schools for selected blind youth of promise, has recently opened a third for these children and more recently still, one for the unpromising. Here is an opportunity for Connecticut to lead us in this complex field of education. It is no criticism of your arrangements that they no longer fit conditions so well as formerly. I have indicated how these conditions have changed and have pointed to still greater changes to come, calling for adaptations to the needs of diverse groups rather than the repetition of the same machinery for all, on the exploded notion that blindness classifies for education.

You have a residential kindergarten; every complete scheme should have one. It has no equivalent for the blind child of five or six. But even here I should have only a small one or, if it gets large, one divided into small family groups.

The Child of Pre-School Age

Since, as someone has so aptly put it: "The younger the child the less its power of resistance; and lack of care may give an unhappy twist to budding minds which may be irrevocable," you might well consider sending your orphaned pre-kindergarten children to The Boston Nursery for Blind Babies, which is richly endowed and quite large enough to take care of the homeless babies of all New England. If you do not, then you should consider your own but keep it a tiny one, since the separation of pre-kindergarten children from parental love and care should be avoided wherever possible. Obviously blind babies, more than most others, need wise nursery care but particularly wise training, physical, mental, moral, and emotional, which function is to be one of the most important advances of the future and, where the child cannot profitably attend a nursery school, this training will be carried at state expense into these babies' homes. Properly done it will save many a pupil from the unpromising

group. This has already been proved true, I am told, both in Cleveland, Ohio, and at the New York Lighthouse for the Blind.

Service Clubs and Their Guidance

There is abroad in the land a growth in the spirit of obligation and service which is heartening. If perchance some club of business men burns to help solve the state problem of the blind child here, as bands of college students, Jewish women, and the Junior League do in a community known to me, by no means turn them down but rather conserve their zeal and guide it into something practical and constructive, such as creating or endowing a normal department for the preparation of pre-school teachers, which is very much needed. But everybody should bear in mind that in all such enterprizes it is the head that must control program and procedure, not simply the heart. The milk of human kindness has ever been more subject to curdling when applied to what is called the "amelioration of the condition of the blind" than when fed to other philanthropies.

Let me tell a story. Some years ago two workers in our field joined Lions Clubs on hearing that this great international service organization had adopted blind children as its special charge. They then urged another worker to join his home Lions, pointing out to him the opportunity of piloting these inexperienced gentlemen through the dangerous waters of emotionalism. This third worker found time to follow up the opportunity suggested and, at the end of ten years of subtly educating and patiently waiting, reported to the other two, who had meanwhile given up in despair, his unquestionable success, to wit:—he had preached so much against irrational, impractical sentimentality that they had done nothing at all.

Nevertheless, though the evidence was negative enough, the seed sown had fallen on good ground; for behold! the eleventh season he reported that from three or four practical suggestions which they had asked him for, they had chosen—a summer camp for little blind girls. The suggestion took so powerfully

that with a whoop they were all for a big enterprize—at least twenty or thirty girls to begin with. "Not at all," said our worker, "twelve is enough. Only after you have learned to run such a camp properly will you be in a position to consider building for another unit of twelve." Now several of these Lions were service-minded enough to lend a hand in clearing the camp site, to paint the houses themselves (as I am told the Hartford Rotarians did your kindergarten in Farmington), to chauffeur the girls to it and to pay it frequent visits. The camp has now passed two successful summers. Everybody is happy, the club itself believing that it has discovered the best Lions service objective yet; and indeed it is not far wrong.

But please notice that the chief good is not to the fortunate girls chosen as campers but rather to all blind girls, in so far at least, as forty business men and their families have learned to believe through intimate observation, that blindness may not mean sadness and tears; no, nor inability to go through with most of the activities any youthful campers love and thrive on; nor need it necessarily mean even social and industrial incompetence. Now the worker and his coadjutors, who through patient propaganda engineered this camp into successful operation, are satisfied that bringing little by little as many as possible of our great army of "Doubting Thomases" over to sensible, practical ways and means of helping lift blind youth from its age-long, false and misunderstood position, is always and everywhere necessary to make practical the schooling of these children, provided our educational objective is, as it seems to me it still should be, to prepare them for distribution in the world.

So therefore, if any large service organization should offer to build you a kindergarten, accept by all means, if and provided the members understand from the outset that the success of the enterprize depends on its being controlled as well as conducted, not by them but by the professionally trained, who both will and must cooperate with the state board itself.

The Small Family Plan of Pupil Housing

You have a central school which habitually wins prizes from other and larger schools for the blind. I once saw a group of these boys so beat, in track events, a team of boys from the local high school that as a result, your superintendent had no further trouble in getting the gymnasium he wanted. (The blind boys' superiority, particularly in the standing high jump, was marked and in consequence, their seeing competitors, after having done their best, sat down and sheepishly watched the bar raised inch by inch and cleared by those who could only feel how high they were jumping.) Now should more pupils apply than this special school of yours can properly accommodate, present-day fitness says: do not enlarge, do not make an institution of it; institutions are monasticisms of the past. Modern idealism calls for the small family plan of Dr. Howe, more expensive to build but not necessarily more so to maintain, and furnishing a development infinitely superior to the mass institution. The larger pupil-age calls for the sifting out of the unpromising to be housed and cared for elsewhere, preferably hidden in the nearby countryside.

The Blind Youth in Public High Schools

I dare not suggest your sending your pupils of high school grade to New York or Boston; though such a change is an extremely profitable experience to any shut-in, provincialized pupil. But room may be gained by utilizing the nearby public high school to which to send out even more of the properly prepared and selected pupils than you have already sent there, to the end that they may early learn to measure themselves up with others of their age and advancement. Obviously such extra-muralism is neither simple nor easy to carry out, but where faithfully and systematically done, as at the sister school in Philadelphia, is a very fair measure of the school's social effectiveness.

Such a scheme would seem to require continuing the common curriculum, however, and, as you know, progressive education breaks away from this conformity and adapts the school pursuits to the individual child on the supposition that intimate environmental training counts for more than the curriculum. Any school for the blind might do far worse than to become independently progressive, experimenting in how best to strengthen the faculties and qualities of each pupil for overcoming all sorts of obstacles with the least aid from outside himself—especially his judgment, his appreciation, his manners, his personality, his memory, his will-power, his productiveness, his general efficiency and acceptability. I say experiment, because a dear old grandmother remarked to me recently:—"I like the theory of these progressive schools, but my grandchildren who attend one of them are the least well-behaved children I ever saw. They show no regard whatever for the wishes of others of the family and are to the last degree wilful and selfish. Do you suppose they will ever get over this liberty-teaching run mad?"

Of course such unrestrained freedom, such thoughtlessness is unnecessary and is not permitted in the best of these modern private schools. Certainly blind children require not licence but training from the day they lose their sight. It is as much a mistake, an unkindness, to give them free rein as it is to smooth out every wrinkle in their path. Unless they learn early to fend for themselves and to adjust their habits and wishes to those of others, their life in the world will be a rough one. Even though I may often have tempered the wind to the shorn lamb, I really believe in requiring our pupils to earn what they get through working for it or otherwise deserving it. It is much easier to read aloud to them and in sundry ways entertain them than it is to teach them to become self-entertaining.

The best school is not really the richest in plant or equipment, not the one doing the most for its charges, but the one encouraging and motivating them to do the most for themselves.

Unfortunately this is the wise, helpful sort of treatment they rarely receive anywhere. It is not their fault, but more our fault and that of society, that so many of them eventually join the army of those who, possibly because thwarted ambition often makes for bitter resentment against life, consider that the world owes them a living; and perhaps the world does owe a living to those whom it has carelessly allowed to go blind. Even so, those of our brothers and sisters are least happy who nurse this canker of the mind.

Curriculum Content

What our pupils most need to cultivate is that acceptability which accompanies character, personality, and power; qualities which come more from how than from what is studied and done at school. Music, one of their best fields in the past, should still be pursued whether its former vogue and practicalness return or not. Music, language, and literature are fine arts in which blind people of parts can, and often do, excel. Such pursuits, cultivated as engrossing habits, can become invaluable to our people when faced with less labor and therefore with more leisure than now. American colleges are beginning to offer courses in the utilization of leisure and in the cultivation of the amenities of living. Let our schools do so too, especially our schools for blind youth for whom little or nothing to do means weariness, the blues, and eventual frustration. Gramophones and radios are the delight of all exiles, all shut-ins, and, when rightly used and controlled, can also be made an invaluable means of instruction and culture. It is as such that they should chiefly be utilized in schools. Their unrestrained, kill-time usage should be confined to movie-fed grown-ups, however, for school children would far better fill the greater part of their apprenticeship for life, as I have said, with practicing and cultivating self-resourcefulness and self-entertainment; and this is particularly true of blind children for whom too much leisure is apt to become a deadly drug on the market.

Special Schools to Be Selective

Yes, I would fain see our special schools become selective in pupils and wisely vigorous, while training the promising group for this changing world. Even health, glorious as it is, is less vital for the handicapped individual who would feel himself wanted, than is radiating character and productive worth to the community. We must never forget that our debt to chronic invalids like the consumptive Dorothea Dix and Robert Louis Stevenson; and to the handicapped, like the deaf Edison and the blind Milton, is vast. Since the condition of blindness develops some unique ways of doing things which all students would do well to copy, let these expedients and devices be discovered, adopted and applied by teachers of the seeing. Individuals of our graduates who fully merit scholarship aid might well go on to college and professional school. But the rank and file will scarcely do this. Most may still seek to become expert in merchandizing or in manual industry, and thereby obtain occupation and partial self-support.

Report declares that in communistic Russia competent blind operatives are today systematically employed in adjusted occupations and become fully as self-supporting as the seeing. That, you know, has never been generally possible in competitive society. It is less and less likely to become so as time goes on. Optimistic Americans believe, however, that an enlightened selfishness will emerge from our present economic troubles and that, along with greatly increased leisure, there will come reduced drudgery for all and greater life-satisfactions, among them adventures in mutual friendships and comradery between the five-sensed and the four-sensed.

If so, our blind will share these benefits of the new social order. Then none of them will be seen begging, as in the street-working, hymn-singing racket just now afoot up and down the sidewalks of one of Boston's shopping districts. A policeman scowling at the sight of it remarked with a good big damn that this sort of defiance of the law should be stopped. "True," said

his interlocutor, "but the blind fellow claims that he has as good a right to beg for himself as charitable societies have to beg for him, and these do this forever and forever, you know." To which our policeman replied only by giving up the argument and stalking away.

A headmaster of an English school for the blind asked me last summer if we Americans still educated our blind people on the theory that they would become independent and competent citizens. "Yes," I answered, "for we have been pretty successful in doing just that. Just now, however, our placement agents are finding their jobs increasingly difficult and disheartening." "Ah!" he then rejoined, "you will eventually become less and less critical of our educational contention that blindness is a real liability, few of whose victims should ever be expected to make good without continued organized assistance."

Another headmaster, of even longer and of quite as successful experience over there, maintains that not only the kindest but also the justest and perhaps the only fair treatment of the blind and others submerged by chronic handicap is to enact for them, as an industrially incompetent class, modest governmental relief. And since such relief would come in money or its equivalent, the current, not wholly unselfish, private charity to the blind would either cease or take higher and lovelier expression. Certainly, as I have already said, their condition fits the rank and file of them for communistic better than for individualistic society.

This last proposition is as radical as it is startling. For a century, as you know, American educators of the blind have aimed to prepare their charges for diffusion in the world. This was the goal of our great pioneer leader, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe; and indeed, no country has been equally successful at it. But its success presupposes not alone belief in the competitive competence of our highly trained pupils but also in the existence of ample opportunity for their employment; that is, plenty of work and all the time there is to work in. During the

last post-war boom period, our employable blind citizens were never more well off. I remember broadcasting the fact in 1926 that my graduates would be found gainfully following all sorts, indeed, most vocations; and every school could say the same. We can none of us so boast of those now being sent forth after training, and perhaps will never again be able to do so.

A Spartan Program of Education

What then are we to do? Our children at school act today as cheerfully carefree and confident as ever; while we their teachers, their home visitors, and their placement agents look to the future with anxiety. We believe that diffusion in the work-a-day world is still the most normal, the happiest goal for our people. But if this has been difficult hitherto, its continued attainment may be possible only according to the following program strictly adhered to: compulsory pre-school training without separation from home and family; compulsory training at school, no longer made easy but stiffened through the knowledge, accepted by teacher and pupil alike, that blindness means possible, nay probable tragedy; that success after graduation presupposes not only regimentation at school and does so whether "education is life," according to the new idea, or "preparation for life" according to the old; that before quitting the shelter of the school the blind youth ought really to gain a little realization of what the world is like through some actual business experience in it.

An Executive Secretary of a Commission for the Blind in one of our Western States writes me: "An understanding that the world outside is not soft and warm but hard and cold should underlie all the education of the blind pupil. His education, therefore, should steel him for the buffetings of the future. It should discipline him to march into action with fortitude and courage. As he must live a Spartan life he must have a Spartan training for it. He must learn responsibility. He must organize his time to make up for the impediment of blindness. He must be

taught to substitute all his remaining faculties to compensate for the lack of sight. It is the afterward that tests. The fair thing is to educate these children with a view to what they may accomplish later and not what they may accomplish now. The emotional path is the easy and the fatal one. The social and economic is hard but just."

Can such a program be carried out? Possibly; but I have only known it approximated by a superintendent who was himself blind. If a new pupil continued to grope his hands were tied behind him; and though the seeing teachers protested, troublesome boys were occasionally whipped before the school. This school, by the way, has always been a fine, select one for pupils earning the privilege of being there on scholarship tenure, and their unmatched after-success has justified the means. We seeing superintendents could hardly carry on so; or if we could, public opinion would interfere. An Austrian superintendent once told me that, having installed simple jumping apparatus in his gymnasium, on which a boy happened to get hurt, the police summarily ordered the apparatus removed!

A Cultural Program of Education

What is the alternative to this Spartan program? As I see it now it is the cultural plan, which is: first, to measure your pupils psychologically at the outset and so learn to know them through and through; then to follow sensible progressive education ideas and ideals at school while fitting a wholly elastic curriculum to the individual pupil rather than the reverse and seeing to it that he does not specialize until after he has had a balancing education; to enrich his environment to the utmost and to motivate him to use it; to build up and strengthen his faculties through their continued exercise; to learn to study hard, to play hard and to play the game; to cultivate an agreeable rather than an aggressive personality; thoroughly to socialize him through small group contributory effort and through democratic family living with his teachers and housemothers, not apart from them

at meals as though they belonged to a different class; to pursue habits of self-help, self-entertainment—pursue also social recreations, the graces and the other amenities of life; to have one or more special hobbies, like Esperanto; to learn to do many useful things well; to have not just one but several practical strings to his bow, particularly musical and manual occupations; and in general to become resourceful, accomplished, and an acceptable member of society.

This is the cultural ideal. The Spartan ideal might prepare many for more or less competitive living in the coming new order. The cultural ideal need not preclude this possibility, but would subordinate the express economic factor of self-support. That is to say, it would imply moderate governmental aid claimable as a right and not received in charity. The blind member of a family who pays his way feels himself welcome there. Would our self-respecting blind people be contented under such a just system of compensatory assistance, provided others laboring under major handicaps were assisted likewise? I do not know; I cannot tell. It might—indeed, may—have to be tried. Would it cost too much? If so and if the individual taxpayer were made to feel the weight of it, the result would be highly desirable. He would immediately agitate for the future stoppage of all needless blindness, his own included.

The Main Goal of the Educator

My subject has to do with education, but since the educator must know the probable future of his charges, he must consider their probable manner of living. His main goal should be their diffusion in the world, but he must acknowledge that Homes for those adults, whether blind or not, who cannot manage to live distributed outside seem to be needed now. A few small ones here and there, especially for blind folk, may also be required for some time to come. Large ones are always undesirable. All permanent massing of human beings, particularly those laboring under the same trouble, is unnatural and unscientific

and has little besides cheapness to recommend it. But why segregate especially for blind people? Why not make it possible to utilize existing homes for the seeing for individual blind people?

Small, temporarily residential training workshops are feasible and serve a useful purpose. They may remain a necessary means to general "adult education," a scheme that has already arrived; but home teaching and home worker schemes are preferable, because more normal, and because normality should be our aim.

Conclusion

A recent Houghton Mifflin publication, *This Changing World,* foretells the eventual coming of a civilization actuated by a much more enlightened selfishness than the present. When that day shall have arrived mankind will have the time, the freedom, and the desire to cultivate true charity, that love which is called the greatest thing in the world. He will then transfer his major energies from relief of suffering to its prevention. As for blindness, there is no real solution of the problem it presents save PREVENTION.

HV1624 c. 1
A
Allen E. Edward
MODERN TENDENCIES IN THE EDUCATION
OF THE BLIND.

Date Due			

Other Educational Publications

FROM HOMER TO HELEN KELLER
By R. S. French, Ph.D. $2.25

TOUCH READING OF THE BLIND
By Karl Bürklen. Translated by Frieda Kiefer Merry, Ph.D. $2.00

THE BLIND CHILD AND HIS READING—A Handbook for Teachers of Primary Braille Reading
By Kathryn E. Maxfield $1.75

ADAPTATION OF EDUCATIONAL TESTS FOR USE WITH BLIND PUPILS
By Kathryn E. Maxfield 75c

GENERAL SCIENCE—A One-Year Course of Study Adapted for Use in Schools for the Blind
Compiled by the General Science Committee 50c

PRESENT STATUS OF INSTRUCTION IN PRIMARY READING IN RESIDENTIAL AND DAY SCHOOL CLASSES FOR THE BLIND
By Kathryn E. Maxfield 25c

SUGGESTIONS FOR MOTIVATING PRIMARY BRAILLE READING
By Frieda Kiefer Merry, Ph.D. 25c

American Foundation for the Blind, Inc.
125 East 46th Street, New York, N. Y.